

The Citizenry of Photography

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Ariella Azoulay. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Zone Books, 2008.

Ariella Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* is, among other things, a political theory of photography that investigates and radically rethinks prevalent conceptualizations of citizenship. As a "political theory," Azoulay's argument poses a direct challenge to both modernist and postmodernist approaches to "photographs of horror" that depict injured populations. By considering such images in relation to questions of citizenship, Azoulay critiques other photography theories as being too narrowly focused on aesthetic considerations or limited to a psychological framework concerned with guilt, compassion, pity or empathy. Indeed, Azoulay argues that, along with national and market forces, these prevalent theories are a part of the socialization process limiting and controlling our photographic experiences, stabilizing what is seen in photos and making them objects of ownership and exchange. In opposition to this "wrong user's manual," Azoulay wants to develop a discourse that anchors photographic spectatorship in civic duty (14). Azoulay's five-hundred page book takes up a number of interrelated topics as ways to illustrate her central theoretical paradigm and model: what she calls the "ethics of spectatorship." As an Israeli citizen concerned with the plight of Palestinians, it is no surprise that the majority of Azoulay's illustrative examples pertain to photographic representations of Palestinians in the Israeli press. In fact, much of the book is given over to an explication of the structural conditions that either enable or prevent particular photographs from becoming "emergency claims" that demand immediate action in response to the catastrophic conditions of certain populations. It is in light of these larger social concerns that Azoulay develops her titular theoretical conception: the civil contract of photography.

Azoulay's formulation of the civil contract of photography posits that photography—as an ensemble of social practices—constitutes a "bind" or set of "political relations" between all parties involved in any act of photography: the photographed, the photographer, and the spectator. This theoretical "citizenry of photography" develops out of two conceptual valences shared by photography and citizenship: recognition and plurality. Azoulay draws directly on Jean-François Lyotard's theorization of *énoncés* to argue that photographs are structured as "statements" that depend on recognition to

gain meaning. Likewise, citizenship for Azoulay is never a possession or fixed status, but depends on an ongoing process of recognition between citizens and a governing power. The plurality at play in citizenship, which assures an equality between citizens and constricts the governing power, is paralleled in “photographs that bear traces of a plurality of political relations that might be actualized by the act of watching, transforming and disseminating what is seen into claims that demand action” (25-26). *The Civil Contract of Photography* is thus a (re)conceptualization of citizenship through the lens of photography and an analysis of photography through the frame of citizenship

In the book’s opening chapter, “Citizens of Disaster,” Azoulay traces the modern formation of citizenship as an “arena of conflict and negotiation” (31). Contra Giorgio Agamben, Azoulay argues for the need to “rehabilitate” citizenship as the “protection of all of the governed” (33). For Azoulay, the traditional distinction between citizen and non-citizen lies primarily in the former’s entitlement to protection of a sovereign power. But, argues Azoulay, this distinction obscures the shared ground of all political subjects as “first and foremost *governed*,” a status that precedes any distinction between citizen and non-citizen. Thus the fragility of the citizen and the non-citizen alike consists of their co-exposure to the power of the state. However, the citizen’s (mis)identification with the collective identity of the nation-state has historically preempted the recognition of the shared conditions of the governed that would constitute political relations not aligned with the interests of the state. In her reading of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), Azoulay discerns two concepts of the citizen. First is the “pale figure” of the citizen as it appears in the declaration itself: a subject tethered to the particular interests of “Man” as the bearer of “natural rights” who restricts the citizen to the protector of these rights. The second image of the citizen is the invisible “addresser” of the declaration, which is the figure of citizenship Azoulay wants to “rehabilitate” as a political stance taken by the governed against the power of the state. In this form, citizenship loses its appearance as a status and becomes a set of civic skills that are exercised or employed to negotiate with a ruling power. Furthermore, for Azoulay, citizenship involves an obligation or duty to voice grievances on the behalf of all the governed. It is this concept of citizenship as the armor of the governed against the power of the sovereign and the essentialism of nationalism that Azoulay finds modeled in the space of political relations related to photography.

According to Azoulay, the social conventions and expectations that solidified around photography in the mid to late 19th century constituted the conditions of possibility for the civil contract of photography and its corollary form of citizenship. In contrast to the contractarian theories of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the civil contract of photography is a “form of mutual obligation that precedes the constitution of political sovereignty” (109). In other words, it is a social contract in which membership does not involve granting power to an authority to which one is obligated;

rather, the contract is an open framework of political relations that are not regulated or exclusively mediated by a sovereign power. In principle, access to the practices of photography are unlimited; anyone can potentially be a photographed individual, a photographer, or a viewer of photographs. The movement of individuals between and amongst these practices of photography undermines any one party's exclusive claim of property rights to a photograph or its meaning. For Azoulay, a photograph and its meaning are the effect of the encounters between the participants—photographed, photographer and spectator—none of which have the authority to fix and determine its sense; photography thus denies any particular claim to sovereignty. While both market and national forces have looked to control the power of photography and turn it into a disciplinary tool of authority, the plurality of positions and virtual equal access to its practices have ensured that it serves no sovereign and “functions on a horizontal plane” (146) as a decentralized power enacted by each of its participants.

The civil contract of photography, the terms and conditions of which are “extracted” from current and past practices of photo production and use, grants the citizenry of photography rights to be an image, take and make images of others, and view the inventory of images created by others. The fundamental “tacit” agreement at play in any photographic encounter is one in which individuals “renounce their exclusive right to their image and consent to becoming an image” (110). The “signatories” to the civil contract of photography, which include anyone who has a relation to photography, by renouncing ownership of their own image and their right to preserve their own “autonomous visual field from external forces,” gain access to the “mixed economy of gazes” of photography's mass-produced images and acquire “an obligation to defend the gaze in order to make it available for others to enter and intermingle” (113). Thus the civil contract of photography demands an “ethics of spectatorship” in which the spectator moves from the passive addressee to the active addresser that reconstitutes a photograph's *énoncé*, especially in those situations in which photography serves as the vehicle for an injured party's grievances.

For Azoulay, the conventions of photography that bind together the citizenry of photography are based in two fundamental expectations that serve as a source of tension which necessitate an active role of citizen-spectatorship. The tension between the agreement that what appears in a photograph “was there” and the agreement that that appearance is always partial—it is “*not* all that was there” (159)—demands that the civil spectator “watch” an image in order to actively reconstitute the conditions of its production and attend to what it makes visible and invisible. In regards to the “images of horror” that are to serve as grievances for the injured:

The spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee's position to the addresser's position to take responsibility for the sense of such photographs by addressing them even further, turning them into signals of emergency, signals of danger or warning—transforming them into emergency claims. (169)

The proliferation of images of horror in the media and the attempts of national and market forces to contain their meaning necessitates the cultivation of a citizen-spectatorship that takes responsibility for the sense of such images and what they depict. But rather than being a normative concept that Azoulay brings to photography from the outside, the universal citizen-spectator is built into the civil contract of photography itself. What unites the participants in any act of photography is not only the tacit agreements of the social contract sketched above, but the assumption of a “universal spectator,” a “moral addressee,” who sees “beyond the narrow considerations of time and place or local interests. Such a subject is an ideal concept, a necessary logical postulate ... a limit concept embodying the ethics of the spectator” (390). Without the concept of such a “true spectator,” there is no explanation for the consent given by the citizenry of photography.

Azoulay demonstrates spectatorship as a practice of civic duty throughout her book by “watching” photographs of two “injured groups: female citizens in Israel and Palestinians living in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967” (36). Her analysis of photographs of the second intifada explicates the conditions under which Palestinians' non-citizenship prevents photo-*énoncés* of the horrors perpetrated against them from becoming emergency claims demanding immediate action (Chapter Four: “Emergency Claims”), keeping them in a state of what Azoulay calls “threshold catastrophe” (Chapter Six: “Photographing the Verge of Catastrophe”)—an ongoing state of catastrophe treated not as a state of emergency or exception but as a routine, “perpetually impending state” (289). Azoulay's attention to these issues in regard to the Israeli-Palestine relation is accompanied by an equally astute attention to the status of women as “flawed citizens” who are denied equal access to the body politic. Indeed, she convincingly argues that the absence of photographs of sexual violence against women in the public sphere amounts to a social prohibition against thinking about and responding adequately to acts of rape (Chapter Five: “Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of Rape?”).

While the detail and care that Azoulay dedicates to the sense of the photos related to these issues make her work of unquestionable value for anyone interested in the political uses of photography, her readings often repeat the theoretical arguments introduced in earlier chapters without developing them further. Nevertheless, *The Civil Contract of Photography* is an invaluable source for those looking to think and practice the politics of visual culture beyond the critique of realism and the discourse

of aesthetics.

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